

ROLES OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN MEDIATING MARITAL CONFLICTS: A COUNSELLING PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of emotional intelligence in mediating marital conflicts from a counseling perspective. It draws on empirical literature, conceptual and theoretical review to understand how emotional intelligence influences marital satisfaction and conflict resolution, the paper further delves in to the common causes of marital conflicts, the mediating roles of emotional intelligence in marital conflicts as well as the techniques for building emotional intelligence in couples, finally the paper also further looks at the implication for counselling practice, the paper aims to equip counselors, educators, and couples with insights for emotionally intelligent relationship management.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Marital Conflicts.

Introduction

Marital relationships are foundational to societal stability, yet they are often afflicted by

conflict arising from poor communication, unfulfilled expectations, and emotional immaturity among others. In Nigeria, the rising rate of divorce, domestic violence, and emotional estrangement among couples has drawn the attention of counsellors and psychologists who seek lasting solutions to these relational breakdowns. While financial strain, infidelity, and cultural shifts are often cited as causes, emerging evidence suggests that emotional intelligence plays a critical, yet underappreciated, role in managing and resolving marital conflicts.

Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to perceive, understand, manage, and regulate their emotions and those of others. In the marital context, Emotional Intelligence involves skills such as empathy, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and constructive communication (Suri & Kochhar, 2021). These skills can determine whether couples navigate conflict productively or descend into destructive patterns of behavior such as blame, resentment, and emotional withdrawal.

Counselling professionals are increasingly integrating emotional intelligence training into marital therapy and conflict mediation. This approach emphasizes self-reflection, empathy development, and emotional control as foundational tools for resolving disputes. Emotional intelligence offers not just a skillset but a mindset that promotes mutual respect, active listening, and non-violent communication.

Recent researches have highlighted the connection between emotional intelligence and marital stability, showing that couples with high emotional intelligence experience fewer conflicts and report higher marital satisfaction. Emotional regulation, empathy, and effective communication are key traits that foster emotional connection and reduce the likelihood of aggressive or avoidant behavior during disputes.

A study by Okafor and Jimoh (2021) surveyed 248 married individuals in southwestern Nigeria and found a strong correlation between emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills. The study noted that individuals who scored high in emotional awareness and empathy were more likely to manage disagreements constructively, using dialogue and compromise rather than confrontation.

Similarly, the study by Eze and Adebayo (2022) examined the impact of emotional intelligence training on 60 couples undergoing marital counseling. After six weeks of structured EI intervention, the majority reported improved conflict management, reduced emotional reactivity, and enhanced mutual understanding. The researchers concluded that emotional intelligence is a trainable skill that can significantly improve marital quality.

Udo and Opara (2023) explored gender differences in emotional intelligence and conflict resolution styles among married educators. Their findings revealed that while women were more likely to express empathy and emotional sensitivity, men who had high emotional intelligence scores were also effective at resolving conflict through compromise and active listening. The study emphasized the need for targeted counselling approaches that enhance EI across both genders.

Collectively, these studies underscore the transformative potential of emotional intelligence in marital relationships. Couples with greater EI are more likely to manage their emotions constructively, de-escalate tension, and engage in meaningful conflict resolution, thereby reducing the risk of separation or emotional disconnect.

Conceptual review

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability of an individual to accurately perceive emotions (both their own and others'), understand emotional messages, regulate emotional responses, and use emotions to guide thinking and actions. The concept was popularized by psychologist Goleman (1995) who outlined five primary components of Emotional Intelligence as follows:

i. Self-awareness

This is the foundation of EI. Self-awareness is the ability to recognize and understand one's moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others. In a marital setting, self-awareness allows a spouse to realize when they are becoming agitated or reactive, preventing knee-jerk reactions that can escalate conflict. It also involves being honest about one's emotional needs and vulnerabilities.

ii. Self-regulation

This is the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods and to think before acting. In emotionally intelligent couples, self-regulation means resisting the urge to lash out in anger, say hurtful things, or withdraw into silence. Instead, partners remain calm and composed even during heated discussions.

iii. Motivation

Emotionally intelligent individuals are driven by a strong internal desire to achieve and improve, rather than by external rewards. In marriage, motivation includes the commitment to make the relationship work, to grow together, and to overcome challenges as a team. This intrinsic motivation drives couples to seek peaceful resolutions rather than resorting to blame or avoidance.

iv. Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It goes beyond sympathy. In a marital context, empathy allows a partner to feel what the other is going through to understand not just the words being said, but the emotional subtext. Empathetic partners validate each other's emotions, reducing defensiveness and building trust.

v. Social Skills

This refers to managing relationships effectively, building networks, and the ability to find common ground and build rapport. Good social skills in marriage include active listening, assertive communication (not aggressive or passive), negotiation, conflict resolution, and positive reinforcement.

Marital conflicts

Marital conflict refers to disagreements or misunderstandings that occur between spouses due to differences in opinions, values, expectations, desires, or unresolved issues. These conflicts can be minor (e.g., over chores) or major (e.g., infidelity or financial problems).

Common causes of marital conflicts:

- i. Communication Breakdown: Inability to express needs or feelings clearly.
- ii. Financial Stress: Disagreements about money management, savings, or spending habits.
- iii. Infidelity and Trust Issues: Breach of trust can create long-term resentment.
- iv. Sexual Incompatibility: Differing sexual needs or expectations.
- v. Parenting Styles: Disagreements over child discipline, education, or values.
- vi. Interference from Extended Family: In-laws or relatives influencing marital decisions.
- vii. Cultural or Religious Differences: Varying backgrounds causing misunderstandings.
- viii. Emotional Baggage: Unresolved trauma or issues from childhood or previous relationships.

Understanding these root causes is essential for developing intervention strategies that are both empathetic and practical.

The mediating role of emotional intelligence in marital conflicts

Emotional intelligence does not eliminate conflict, but it mediates or moderates the way conflict is handled (Ullah, 2022).

Conflict De-escalation

EI helps individuals avoid escalation by calming themselves before responding. A spouse with high EI knows when to pause, reflect, and speak from a place of understanding rather than rage.

Emotional Validation

Couples with emotional intelligence recognize each other's emotional expressions as valid even when they disagree. This validation helps reduce feelings of rejection and fosters closeness.

Constructive Communication

Emotional intelligence leads to communication styles that are open, honest, and respectful. Instead of yelling or shutting down, emotionally intelligent partners listen actively and respond with care.

Empathy During Disputes

Even in moments of disagreement, emotionally intelligent spouses can put themselves in each other's shoes. This reduces defensiveness and increases the likelihood of reconciliation.

Long-Term Relationship Resilience

EI equips couples with tools to adapt over time. Rather than letting small issues fester, emotionally intelligent partners address concerns early and with maturity.

Techniques for building Emotional Intelligence in couples

Counsellors can use the following exercises and techniques:

- ◆ **Emotional Journaling:** Encourages self-awareness by documenting emotional triggers and responses. Over time, patterns emerge that can guide behavioural change.
- ◆ **Active Listening Training:** Helps couples develop empathy and patience. One partner speaks while the other listens without interruption, paraphrases what they heard, and validates the speaker's feelings.
- ◆ **Role-Playing and Reversal:** Partners take turns acting out each other's roles during conflicts. This develops empathy and deeper emotional understanding.
- ◆ **Non-Violent Communication (NVC):** A communication style that encourages expressing observations, feelings, needs, and requests without blame or criticism.

Challenges in applying EI to Marital Conflict Resolution

Despite its benefits, applying EI in counseling has some limitations:

1. **Cultural Norms:** In some societies, expressing emotion is seen as weakness, particularly among men.
2. **Gender Expectations:** Emotional expression may be unevenly distributed; men may be discouraged from empathy, while women may be overburdened with emotional labor.
3. **Trauma History:** Individuals with unprocessed trauma may find it difficult to access emotional states or express feelings safely.
4. **Resistance to Counselling:** Some partners may deny their role in conflict and resist emotional growth (Basu, 2020).

Conclusion

Marital conflict is an inevitable aspect of intimate relationships, but it need not lead to disconnection or divorce. Emotional intelligence offers couples the tools to understand and manage their feelings, empathize with each other, and resolve disputes constructively.

This paper has shown that emotional intelligence when nurtured through counselling can significantly mediate conflict in Nigerian marriages. The way forward involves mainstreaming EI education in counselling programs and encouraging couples to develop the emotional skills necessary for enduring, respectful partnerships.

Rather than focusing solely on conflict avoidance, a counselling approach that builds emotional intelligence will empower couples to face challenges with maturity, compassion, and clarity.

Recommendations

The evidence supports the integration of emotional intelligence training into marital counseling programs in Nigeria. The following recommendations can help institutionalize Emotional Intelligence based conflict resolution in marriages:

1. Pre-marital Counseling Programs: Counselling centers and religious institutions should include EI modules in pre-marital education, focusing on empathy and emotion regulation.
2. Emotional Intelligence Workshops: Counsellors should offer group or individual workshops for couples facing relational challenges. These workshops should be practical, including role-play, journaling, and feedback sessions.
3. Curriculum Development: Schools of education and counselling should integrate EI training into their curricula to prepare professionals who can support families with EI skills.
4. Conflict Mediation Resources: Counselling centers should develop toolkit such as emotion recognition cards or guided conversation frameworks to help couples practice emotionally intelligent communication at home.
5. Further Research: Longitudinal and mixed-method studies are needed to explore the long-term impact of EI training on marriage stability across diverse Nigerian ethnic and socio-economic groups.

By promoting emotional intelligence, counsellors and educators can help build more resilient, empathetic, and communicative marriages ultimately contributing to stronger family units and a healthier society.

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